

CHICAGO – U.S. Representatives Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) and Melissa Bean (D-Ill.) joined with Metra Executive Director Phil Pagano at Ogilvie Transportation Center today to warn of an impending federal “Transit Doomsday” if action is not taken in Springfield to pass a transportation capital bill. While another state Doomsday was scheduled by the Governor in January, Pagano warned that the stalemate in Springfield is already restricting access to federal matching funds for transportation projects.

“Competing states do not suffer from the political gridlock of the Illinois state government. Unless we act soon, Springfield’s inability to match federal funds will provide a golden opportunity for states like California, Texas and Florida to use monies which would have come here,” Congressman Kirk said. “In the last transportation bill, Illinois won more approvals for federal funds than any other state. That congressional victory may be squandered unless Illinois state officials find a way to match Federal Transit Administration funds.”

Metra’s Executive Director Pagano warned that congestion-fighting Metra expansion projects are being halted due to a lack of state matching grants. Preliminary engineering stopped on improvements needed for two projects: 1) the Suburban Transit Access Route (STAR) line that would link northwest and west suburbs to O’Hare/downtown, and 2) the Union Pacific-Northwest Line expansion project. Metra’s originally planned federally-funded expansion projects would have reduced gridlock by taking commuters off expressways by providing environmentally-friendly transit.

In 2005 the Illinois congressional delegation united to deliver the largest transportation funding authorization in state history as part of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). Included in the authorization were Metra funds for commuter rail expansion projects.

Prior to construction of the new STAR Line and South East Service, Metra must improve a key rail intersection where rail lines cross, including the Union Pacific Northwest, Milwaukee Northwest, Milwaukee West, North Central Service and Amtrak.

This connection is the “Commuter Railroad Hillside Strangler” of for northeast Illinois. Urgent improvements are needed for this intersection used by more than 300 trains per day, carrying more than 80,000 passengers to 75 different suburban stations. Metra applied for funding the

preliminary engineering of this improvement but the Federal Transit Administration notified Metra that no action can be taken until the state provides the necessary local match (20 – 50 percent of necessary funds). Because the state has no capital budget, the FTA indefinitely suspended this project.

During a 3-hour morning peak, Metra carries 50 percent of the commuters along the busiest corridors from suburban communities to Chicago. Without Metra, 29 lanes of expressway would need to be built.

“As suburban communities continue to grow, the STAR Line will be required to prevent crippling traffic congestion,” Congressman Kirk said. “The most appropriate time to fix this problem is now, before the gridlock gets worse. The lack of matching funds for Metra’s projects will delay or end the hopes of commuters to see improvements.”

Kirk and Bean also released a summary report of the Suburban Transportation Commission, including key transportation solutions for northeastern Illinois such as public transit funding distribution changes and additional security to protect passengers at O’Hare.

Kirk and Bean, along with state and local leaders, created the bipartisan Suburban Transportation Commission in April 2007. Members include:

- * State Sen. Michael Bond
- * State Rep. Ed Sullivan Jr.
- * Mayor Maria Rodriguez, Village of Long Grove
- * Mayor Bill Gentes, Village of Round Lake
- * Charlie Eldredge, Executive Director, McHenry County Economic Development Corporation
- * Chris Robling, Jayne Thompson and Associates

The founding principles of the Commission are to educate key stakeholders and the public about the changing needs and demographics of the Chicagoland area, as well as develop new ideas for improving transportation opportunities in suburban communities. More than two-thirds of all Chicagoland residents now live in suburban Cook and the Collar Counties.